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ART. III. — FITZ-GREENE HALLECK.

ON the 15th of May the first monumental statue of an American author was unveiled in the Central Park of New York. It is not a fortunate specimen of our native art. The posture is ungraceful, the face over-conscious to the verge of ostentation, and the general character of the figure is so theatrical that few of those who knew the poet will immediately recognize him. But the question of the artistic value of the work is subordinate to that of its place as a landmark in the history of our literature. Washington Irving, born in the first year of the nation's independence, and first to represent the American people in letters throughout the world, still waits for commemoration in bronze or marble. Cooper, Poe, and Hawthorne, who, after him, have received wider fame and exercised a more distinct literary influence than any others of our departed authors, wear no honors save those bestowed upon their graves. Why should the first distinction fall upon Fitz-Greene Halleck, an author whose period of activity was so brief, whose good works are so few, and whose name has scarcely passed beyond his country's borders ?

To answer this question fairly and satisfactorily, we are obliged to consider the poet's character and personality, and the peculiar circumstances of his literary life. The latter have faded from the memory of the general public ; for every great political convulsion immediately throws the Past into sudden remoteness and indistinctness, by interposing a deep chasm between it and the Present. It is quite time that a history of American Literature — if only in its main outlines — should be written. The men who remember, clearly and intelligently, all the phenomena of our intellectual growth previous to the year 1830 are becoming few ; and to them, rather than to old newspaper-files, must we turn for the best knowledge of those early days. Halleck's importance is at once perceived, if we project him against the background of his time. His position is almost that of the German poet, Gellert, — the first to sing a natural note, in a waste of dulness and imitation, and grow-

ing silent as he lived to be the contemporary of far greater men. Each of his lyrics came forth like a burst of light, because the poetic atmosphere was one of level gloom. He was the American twin-brother of Campbell, to whom, as a poet, he always felt nearest, yet whom he never imitated. He was cast in an independent mould; and it is not likely that, under other circumstances or with greater incentives to labor, his literary record would have been different in character.

The vein of poetic genius in Halleck's nature was wholly genuine, yet it was exceptionally quiet and undemonstrative. Its activity was less inherent in its substance than dependent on some external stimulus. For one who wrote so much and so fairly as a boy, his first flush of manhood and contact with life are surprisingly barren of verse. His friendship with Joseph Rodman Drake, which began about the close of the year 1813, and continued until the latter's death in 1820, was the spell which awoke his true powers, and gave him a swift and delightful fame. Drake was a born singer, — almost an *improvisatore*, — whose imaginative faculty, although of rather flimsy texture, was always rapid, joyous, and infectious. He wrote in the ardor of his first conceptions, and seems to have rarely retouched or elaborated his work. Halleck, who, I suspect, composed more slowly, resembled Drake in the unstudied ease, grace, and sweetness of his lines. Before "The Croakers" and "Fanny," there was no American verse that was not either pompously solemn or coarsely farcical: hence this new fountain, wilfully casting forth its pure sparkling, capricious jets of song, was welcomer to the public than poetry can ever be again. If to readers of this day the sentiment may now and then appear conventional, or the humor dull, or the political allusions obscure, it must be remembered that Halleck was first read by a generation which had never before been refreshed by sentiment and humor and cleverness of allusion. The light *abandon* of his stanzas was as new as their racy local flavor. The mock American Muse seemed suddenly to have come down from her clattering *cothurni*, thrown away her grim Minerva-mask, and shown herself in young and breathing beauty, with the elastic step of a mountain maiden.

After Drake's death, Halleck's trip to Europe and his ardent Philhellenic sympathies prolonged his poetic activity for a time; but the ten years, from 1817 to 1827, begin and complete his season

of productiveness. Nothing that he wrote before or after that period possesses any vitality; and it is probable, in fact, that he will only be known to later generations by six poems, which I venture to name in the order of their excellence: "Marco Bozzaris," "Burns," "Red Jacket," "Alnwick Castle," "The Field of the Grounded Arms," and "On the Death of Drake." His "Fanny" may still be read with interest, but its original charm faded away with the surprise of its first appearance; some of the other brief lyrics and songs are unaffected, graceful, and either tender or mocking; and in a fragment of his poem on Connecticut we find these lines, which, although less sinewy and imaginative, are of the same quality as some passages in Lowell's noble patriotic Odes:—

"Thy gallant men stepped steady and serene
To that war-music's stern and strong delight,
Where bayonets clenched above the trampled green,
Where sabres grappled in the ocean fight;
In siege, in storm, on deck or rampart, there
They hunted the wolf Danger to his lair,
And sought and won sweet Peace, and wreaths for Honor's hair!"

Six lyrics seem to be a slender basis for a poetic fame; but has Collins more?—has even Gray more? And these six of Halleck are indisputably his own. We may find in them the measure of Scott, something of the diction of Campbell, or the free metrical cadences of Byron, yet each of these features is colored by a distinct individuality, and all are fused into a poetic substance which asserts its native quality. Since Halleck never gave his life to the service of poetry,—never made an artistic ideal of that which came to him as an unsought delight,—we may with all the more justice accept his highest performance as the true measure of his genius. He lived at a time, and in a community, which did not guess the necessity of educating the finer intellectual gifts, of training the wings which would essay loftier flights. Perhaps the recognition of this necessity, coming upon him too late, may account for the silence of his later years. His mind, although limited in its range of interests, was both sound and delicately organized: he was as capable of distinguishing between his own complete or partial success as any critic of his day; and the circumstance that, after writing "Marco Bozzaris," he handed the manuscript to his fellow-clerk, Mr. Embury, with the simple question, "Will this

do?" was not, as Mr. H. T. Tuckerman asserted, an evidence of "unconsciousness of its superior merit," but the strongest possible proof that the author knew it *would* do. The poem is as far above Drake's "American Flag" — or, indeed, any heroic lyric which up to that time had been written in this country — as refined gold is above its oroid imitation. The invocation to Death has a solemn sweetness which perpetually haunts the memory: who has ever more nobly described the coming of death to the hero than in this passage? —

"Come in her crowning hour, and then
Thy sunken eye's unearthly light
To him is welcome as the sight
Of sky and stars to prisoned men :
Thy grasp is welcome as the hand
Of brother in a foreign land ;
Thy summons welcome as the cry
That told the Indian isles were nigh,
To the world-seeking Genoese,
When the land-wind, from woods of palm,
And orange groves, and fields of balm,
Blew o'er the Haytian seas."

Carlyle complacently calls Walter Scott "a healthy man"; yet, if we take the phrase in its best intellectual sense, it is the reverse of disparaging. In the same sense Halleck might be aptly described as a healthy poet. He certainly knew no imaginative or spiritual woes; he even seemed to be incapable of comprehending them in others. His faculty acted freely, soaring or sinking into silence at its own good-will, taking the facts of life as something inevitable, without prying into the mystery of Evil, or beating its wings bloody against that barrier of transparent adamant which separated it from so much possible Good. He never attempted to express anything higher than the principle of Manhood, and his verses sprang from the source of that principle in his own being. Poetry so virile and sincere can never wholly lose its value. Men will become weary of abstruse metaphysical problems in rhyme, will occasionally prefer the ordinary moods of life without any admixture of doubt or speculation, and, after a surfeit of alliteration and rhythmical effect, will still find pleasure in honest and unexaggerated sentiment.

I have interpreted Halleck's character as a poet by my knowledge of him as a man. My acquaintance with him, renewed at

long intervals, extended over the last fifteen years of his life. Although the intolerance of youth still clung to me, and his tastes and opinions were sometimes so divergent from mine as to seem incredible, they were always expressed so simply and with such manly gentleness that I never ventured to dispute them. In fact, it is only by applying to my very distinct recollection of my intercourse with him the corrective of a somewhat maturer judgment, that I have reached a fairer recognition of his nature. I can see, now, to what extent his later life was an anachronism, — and utterly without his power to change the fact. No gentleman of Copley's painting, stepped out of his frame into the life of our day, could have found himself more alien to our literary tastes and prevalent political views. Nay, it even seemed that Halleck's nature was an instance of what Darwin terms the "reversionary tendency," — the sudden reappearance of an original type, after a long course of variation; for he was neither republican, democratic in the ordinary sense, Protestant, nor modern. He was congenitally monarchical, feudal, knightly, Catholic, and mediæval; but above all, *knightly*. I do not suppose that he had any curious habit of introversion, but a delicate natural instinct told him that he did not belong — or had belonged only for a short time — to this century; and he accepted the fact as he would have accepted any fate which did not include degradation.

His features were not handsome, but the clear, mellow manliness of his expression made them seem so. His forehead, however, was nobly arched, indicating a large and well-proportioned brain, and it was balanced by a finely formed chin. He was a little under the medium height, but his erect carriage, even as an old man, and his air of natural dignity, had the effect of adding somewhat to his stature. I have never seen a man who was so simply and inevitably courteous; he was an incarnate *noblesse oblige*. When he was sitting to Mr. Hicks for his portrait (I think in 1855), I called several times, at the artist's request, to make his hours of service a little more endurable, by inciting him to talk. He always gave his views with the greatest frankness, yet would listen to the opposite with a most delightful tolerance. More than once, after uttering something which probably brought my surprise unconsciously into my face, he would quietly add: "I am not a republican, you must remember; I am a monarchist." I

should also have supposed him to be a Roman Catholic, from the manner in which he occasionally referred to the Church of Rome ; but he expressed, in reality, the feeling of an Anglican Catholic who regretted the separation.

One day the conversation turned upon poetry, and finally led to a discussion of some modern poets. Halleck at once became interested, straightened himself in his chair, and a new glow, as if slowly evolved from within, came upon his face. "They are still trying to define poetry," he said. "It can be explained in a word: it's simply the opposite of reason! Reason is based on fact; and fact is not poetry. A poet has nothing to do with the facts of things, for he must continually deny them!" "Will you give me an illustration?" I asked. "Certainly," said he; and then quoted, not from Campbell, or Byron, or Moore, as I was expecting, but these lines from Wordsworth's "Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle":—

"Armor, rusting on his walls,
On the blood of Clifford calls.
'Quell the Scot!' exclaims the lance:
'Bear me to the heart of France!'
Is the longing of the shield:
Tell thy name, thou trembling field,
Field of death, where'er thou be,
Groan thou with our victory!"

"There!" Halleck exclaimed: "was ever anything more irrational than the lance exclaiming and the shield longing?—but what poetry it is!" Taking his definition in that sense, of course I agreed with him; but when the conversation incidentally touched upon later authors, I preferred to disagree in silence, for the sake of hearing many curious and unfamiliar opinions. I found that he was no admirer of Tennyson, although he admitted that the latter possessed genius in a distorted form. I quoted several passages without much effect, until I happened to remember the little fragment called "The Eagle," which Halleck had never heard:—

"He clasps the crag with hookéd hands:
Close to the sun, in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world he stands."

A sudden light flashed into the poet's eye. "'Ringed with the azure world,'" he repeated; "yes, that's poetry!" Presently he

continued; "Browning seems to be becoming very popular. I had read very little of him, and that little I did not like; but I thought I must try again. So the other day I took up his last volume, and the very first line of the first poem was this: 'Where the quiet-colored *end* of evening smiles!' How can an end smile? Evening may do so,—but 'the quiet-colored end'! The next line was: 'Miles and miles'—so that the *end* was not merely smiling, but it smiled miles and miles! It was impossible for me to read any more. I see that people nowadays admire these things, and are not offended by the violations of good grammar and rhetoric, but I can't understand it!"

It has often occurred to me, since, that Halleck's feudal inclinations sprang from the partial suppression—or, at least, the imperfect development—of his æsthetic nature. With all his monarchical faith, he was a sincere and devout lover of his country, and there is no touch of disloyalty to the principles of her government in his poetry. Perhaps, also, he unconsciously exaggerated his views, since they might indirectly explain his silence to the generation for which he did not and could not sing. During the latter years of his life he was overlooked except by the circle of old friends who knew the pure integrity and nobility of his nature, and in many of whom the music of his early fame still found an echo. To these, and to a small circle of cultivated men in other parts of the country, his monument is due.

I saw him last, about the beginning of the war, on one of his visits to New York. Calling with a friend at the quiet hotel where he was wont to lodge, I found that he was ill, and would have withdrawn; but he sent down a request that we should go to his room. With unnecessary courtesy, he had risen from his bed and taken an arm-chair: he looked weak and suffering; but his kindness and gentle grace were so perfect as to be really touching. It was impossible to detect how much effort he made to converse cheerfully; the spirit of the knightly gentleman controlled his body, and gave him a factitious ease, which I trust we did not abuse.

No great poet is ever suddenly born into an age barren of poetry. He has his forerunners as well as his successors. Our only earlier poet than Halleck is Richard H. Dana, who still lightly wears the snows of his ninety winters; but his strains are few and grave,

and they reached the public after the ringing lyrics of the former. We must count them both as forerunners of the greater names in American Literature that have since come, and the greater that may yet come. If Halleck attained an easier fame than would be possible to like achievement now, we must not forget that it was through rising so much higher than those before and beside him. For a short time he was the representative of our poetry as Irving was of our prose; and both were the prophecies of their later brethren. It is idle to speculate (although the world is very fond of so speculating) upon what might have been the result if an author had yielded to, or resisted, this or that influence. Most lives shape themselves, in spite of seeming possibilities; and they do not often fail fairly to represent the quality of the man. Taking both his literary record and the somewhat uneventful story of his modest life, we shall find no reason to diminish our offering of respect and honor to *Fitz-Greene Halleck*.

BAYARD TAYLOR.